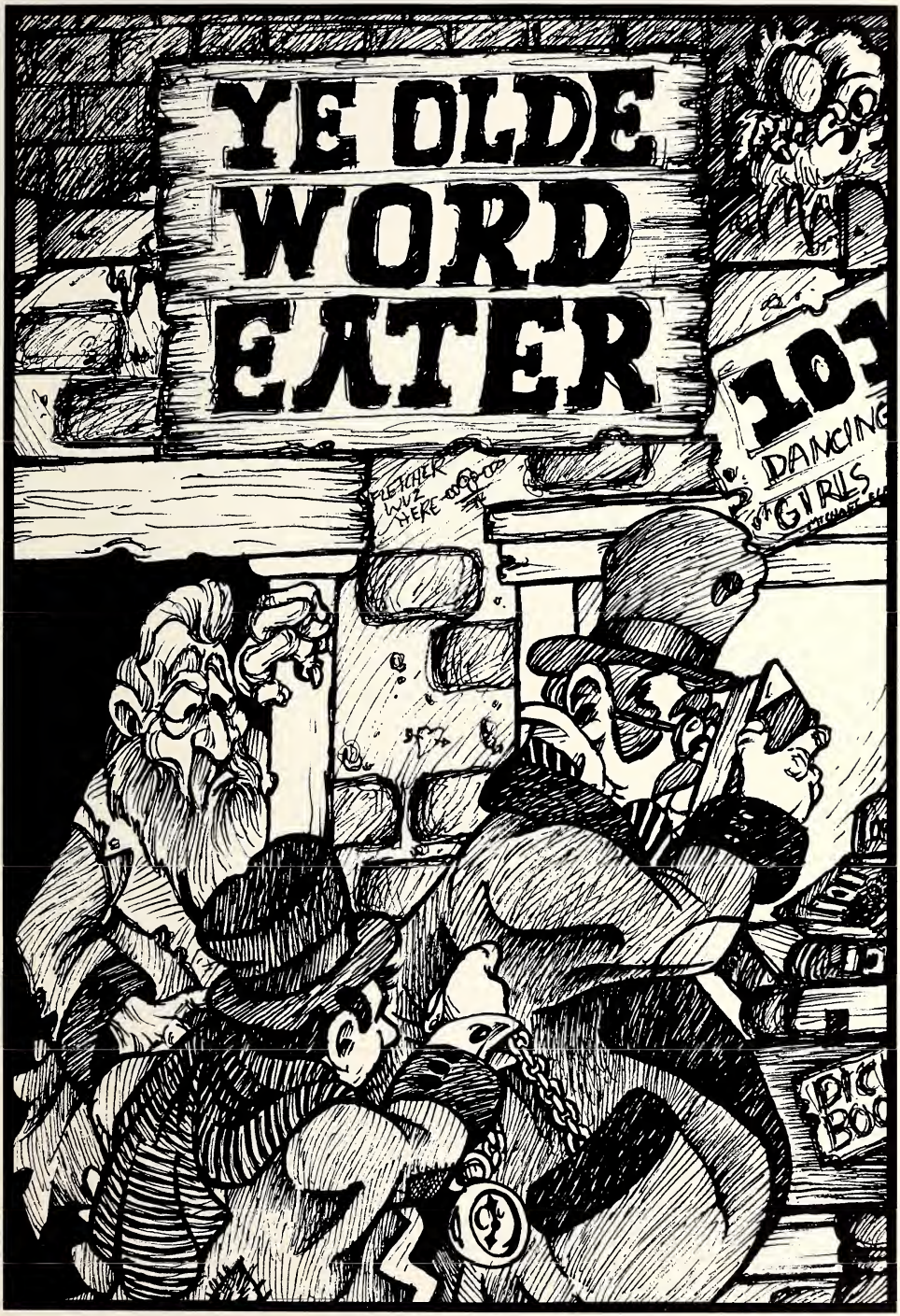
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Excuse Us

Jeff Adams

We all need excuses
Living our lives day to day
Asking each other why
Never questioning the answers
What's unaccepted
Will stay unaccepted
'Til we stop asking why
Excuse me
Excuse you
In what we say
In what we do
Got to live
Got to hide
It's all we have
It's all one side
Of that blank piece of paper
That life will crumple up
Don't look at the other side
Just get an excuse
And live just to lie
One million excuses high
The foundations of this dedicate world
will crumble
Leaving the blind to lead
the ignorant
Into another age
Of excuse
and easy answers

So Called Hope

Jeff Adams

Dead air and nowhere to fall.
Man ventures out to conquer all.
Stabbed a stranger just for his pay.
Blood hits pavement and runs away.
Window pane and staring eyes.
Little boy grew and wanted to cry.
Touched by big hands of one man's desire.
Cannot forget that his fortune's a liar.
Kiss, touch, and alcohol head.
All of her dreams fell out of bed.
Wasn't her fault, wasn't her shame.
Razor cuts deep but doesn't end pain.
In a world so desolate from social decay.
The sun will shine down
to chase nightmares away.
But too much sunlight can blind
our weak eyes.
And the blind never know
where the real answer lies.

Blind

Jimmy Albright

Sometimes I wonder if I'm the
only person
left
who hasn't found the North Star.
For the wonder of my night
has been unraveled,
And the sky has fallen from divinity.

The day darkens, the light gone dim,
And I no longer see the faces
of my tormentors.
The air falls silent as the wind loses its voice,
and a sharp tongue becomes deafening

as a thought.

Sometimes I sit and search
heaven,
looking for the brightest star of all.
But you elude me, escape my grasp.
And you flee to the farthest reaches
of the Imagination.

A cloud fills the sky, quickly followed
by others.
It begins to rain, but I am out in the open,
with nowhere to hide.
I close my eyes and wince at the saltiness
of the drops.

But the silence and the darkness faded away
tonight.

For tonight I looked up into the heavens
and blinked the tears away,
startled by the sudden light of the North Star.
"You were not there before," I thought.

And yet, I knew that you had always
been there.
Outshining the rest — and lighting my life.

I just never opened my eyes.

. . . the Greatest Lie of All

Jimmy Albright

Too often I've found myself dreaming
about a life with you.
My mind seems to drift freely,
swimming through the haze called
tomorrow . . .

And I've wakened to the horrible nightmare
that was my real life . . .

But you have always been there.
Comforting me, assuring me
that it had all been just a bad dream.

I'd smile fondly and kiss you
softly on the forehead.
You would caress my cheek
and peacefully fall back asleep.

I lie there quietly, savoring it.
Your warmth wraps around me,
washing away the coldness I'd known
before you came into my life.

My skin tingles as I sense your body
next to mine.
I shiver as I can feel your heartbeat
come into harmony with mine.

I whisper gently, "I love you,"
the emotion flowing from my voice
like a mighty river.
And you open your eyes,
looking back at me with blue sphere
of light . . .

I snap awake, shiver with a cold sweat.
My arm darts out desperately,
    searching for you.
And I find—

A century full of emptiness.
And I close my eyes for the last time.

Matters of the Heart

Melissa Andras

I cannot say who was in the wrong, for the heart, there is no right or wrong, only a triumphant feeling bound by the glory and graciousness of winning the love one knows one deserves. I never quite intended for it to go as far as it did, but oh, how well I did perceive such an extraordinary plan.

I remember it as well as a mirrored reflection of myself. It was the summer of 19— boiling hot, they said it was the hottest day of the year. I was walking along in the park with my picnic basket set for one, as I always had on a Friday afternoon. Before I had even caught sight of him, my basket had tumbled to the ground, its contents scattered among the grass and wildflowers. He tried to apologize, for he had not meant to run into me, but I was snooty and rich, so I looked away from him in disgust as my uncle Rayford had taught me.

The man just stood there for a minute, and then all of a sudden, as if he had just awakened, he took his hat off and took hold of my hand. What happened next was the utterance that a snooty rich girl would never forget. "Had I known that being utterly careless would run me into the most beautiful and aloof woman in town only to have her ignore my apology, I should guess that I would have been more careful." I was outraged by his words, in shock I suppose. I did not know if the man had complimented me or insulted me; it was that confusion that attracted me to him so.

In the days to come Mr. Cromer would accompany me everywhere, and my Friday lunches soon became packed for two. He had amazed and refined my spirit, I truly believed that I loved him. For a while I was content, but soon he became distant, in another dimension of thought, in which I apparently had no part. I had the feeling that there was another woman, only to find out that Jonathan Cromer was indeed a married man. At first I wasn't sure if I cared until I realized that as long as she was alive, he could never truly be mine. I decided that I would find her, befriend her, and then take care of the problem as one might say.

As the day turned into night, Jonathan decided that it was time for him to go, and so I followed him home, only to see such a sight that it would take my breath away. She was like and angel and he the devil, for I was his greatest sin.

The next day, alone and at will, I casually bumped into her in a crowd of people. I thought it a fitting introduction, and so the plot thickened. She was a lively woman. Raquel Dominique Cromer was her name, and I found that she was wealthy as a queen. She wore only gold and diamonds and ate the finest foods. She had long copper hair that flowed in curly tendrils

to her waist. She was a masterpiece. She took a liking to me, I suppose, and so I became a kind of live-in companion to her. When Mr. Cromer was introduced to me, he was amazingly just as charming as usual. As it got dark, his wife blindly ushered me to my chambers.

The days passed into weeks and the weeks into months. Everyday I fell more in love; every time we kissed my heart fluttered with the happiness only true love could bring. It was time. We would perform the murder together. It would be most painful; we had decided on that. And so we went on with our perfect plan in the dark blanket of the night. They never found out who had committed the murder; the sick vicious being that had given out forty-two stab wounds to this innocent person. There were no solid motives and not a ray of convincing evidence.

Now I am truly happy and we are together forever. Raquel and I bought a house together and are very much in love. Jonathan Cromer shall never hurt again.

I don't believe killing him was wrong; it had to happen, Raquel and I only helped it along. I believe that when dealing with the matters of the heart there really is no right or wrong, and in the end "love truly conquers all."

My Salty Love

Melissa Andras

Oh, how I long for you
and your deep brown eyes.
I just don't know what to do,
you're not like other guys.
Even when I bite your head off
you don't seem to mind.
People stare and people scoff
but I won't leave you behind.
I love to look at your dark skin,
it makes me smile so bright.
Your melting, soothing, salty grin,
I want another bite.
People say I've gone too far,
say I should buy a slurpy.
They don't know how good you are,
I love you, my Beef Jerky!

Treasures of the Sea

Melissa Andras

I look out the window,
the leaves no longer there.
The landscape seems to dwindle
with no one left to care.
The trees were once so strong
but now they've turned to grey.
They lost all hope
When he left them one day.

The water once so clear
has now turned to black.
It's been many years
and he's not coming back.
His bright blue eyes no longer stare
at the crashing, bitter sea.
The ground that matched his sandy hair
has been stolen by the breeze.
One cool summer day
so many years ago
he was torn away from me,
my pain can never slow.
They all miss him so much,
but none as much as me.
I lost my only baby boy
to the vengeful turquoise sea.

Postage from Jackie

Anonymous

1) scrawled atop
a crayon drawing
(an extra terrestrial housed in a fortress
surrounded by aircraft):
"Jesus Saves Jesus Saves Jesus Saves"

2) a polaroid
in her prom dress &
in the background her roommate
w/ the bicycle helmet lighting a cigarette

Belly Music (of Charles Mingus)

Anonymous

The belly of this music
sits enough
twirling string
to know
the mathematic at
finger
+ thumb
the lacquered
box-melody
the octave
hum
the bridge-buckle
sha-tuck-a
sha-tuck-a
as if we could
lay our legs straight
back bent
head in lap
! shout !
the vibration within
and against
the gut
it is like the rose

these feet are the bloom
and the mind is the slow swirling root

Crazy

Anonymous

Tears stream down my face
As you stand there laughing
Proud of what you have made me
A queen of fools
A master of denial
And I love you for it.
This feeling I have is much too strong
Desire burns away all my reason
Common sense won't extinguish
My insanity
I'm crazy about you
Crazy about you
Crazy because of you
The lunatic inside me enjoys you.
Nothing makes sense once you walk
    in the room
Yet everything seems so clear
I'll take you anyway I can have you
One fix is never enough
I must have another and another
And still one more
'Til I scream
And you laugh
It makes me crazy.
Crazy for you
Crazy about you
Crazy because of you
The lunatic inside me enjoys you.
Life has meaning
If I can serve you
Fill your needs
Feel worthy
Possibly someday be loved
Voices are crying out
"Do it again . . . and again . . . and again . . ."
Don't wait for compensation
Rejuvenation
Life is short
And often bittersweet
I must do what I want
While I can.
What I want is you
Anyway I can have you
Until your blue eyes drive me crazy
And back once more.
I'm crazy for you
Crazy about you
Crazy because of you
This lunatic inside me enjoys you.

Untitled

Anonymous

I find myself searching
For a way to escape you
But every time I think I am over you
I hear your voice calling me back again
Just one more time
Then I will grow up
Be the adult my family wants me to be
The responsible voice of reason
There's a child inside of me who's crazy
Crazy insane for the sound
    of your whispers
Hypnotic harmonies

A single note
Is all it takes
To bring me back into your realm
One in which I forget who I am
And my place in my world
For a moment in time I belong to you
In paradise
Where music and lyrics speak to the soul
And change this woman's life
Forever
Your vocals have become my gospel
You speak to me in four part harmonies
I hear your message in a thousand chords
Resounding truth into this reality
In my mind I know
Music to be mere diversion
Perhaps cathartic confessions at times
But my heart rides
On a raven's wing
As the sound of your voice takes me home.

— To J. —

Anonymous

Images racing through my mind
Of the life I have created
With you
Impossibilities
There's nowhere to go
Still I scrape to get away
From you
The pictures
And your memory
I'm walking away
Yet feel closer to you
Than ever I have been before
I can't tell if it's my imagination
Or your manipulation
But my life feels complete
Only when you make me feel
Nothing at all.

Untitled

Anonymous

Write what you know
That's what I've been told
But trapped in confusion
What do I know anymore?
The eternal questions have already
been answered
By someone more experienced
More eloquent than I
In a language of logic I could not understand
In a verse full of babble
You would not comprehend
Yet still I feel drawn to this page in my hand

I must write to live
Someone scribed in my destiny
Though I may act erratically
I say what's within me
Whether my thoughts are poignant or droll
At this point is of no concern
For all of my reasons for baring my soul
Will confuse me wherever I turn
I say this to you to hear myself speak
In hopes I make sense of it all
These words when repeated
Might drive me to think
And write my way over this wall.

Awakening

Anonymous

You call
Expect me to jump
Are you ready to
Finally
Accept me for me?
Wrong
Only heartache again
Take me back to the past?
I just barely escaped
The last time
You expect me
Never to change
Stay the same gullible fool
Who fell for you all that time ago
Always there for you
Whenever you needed me
That person is gone
Something snapped inside of her
You no longer control her
This life she leads belongs to me now
You scream
Demanding to know
What horrible crime you've committed
This time
I tell you
For once it's not you

Untitled

Anonymous

Memories do not distort the fact
I will never regain
What we lost.

Untitled
Anonymous

I just reached down inside
And found the strength
To let go.

Strike the Match
Anonymous

Kerosene fills the room
Passion ignites the soul
Playing with fire is a dangerous thing
Touch the flame, watch yourself burn
A simple touch
Then a feel
Fire isn't this hot
Why should I be?
My mind is screaming "NO!!!"
But my body is already inflamed
Incased in a torch of emotion
That cannot be extinguished
No matter how much sweat
You pour over me
Kerosene fills the room
Passion ignites the soul
Playing with fire is a dangerous thing
Touch the flame, watch yourself burn
A single strike
Starts the spark
One simple motion
Shouldn't make this soul so dark
A slow burn
Much too easy
How high can I get it?
Let me show you the pain
The love
The fear of the finish
Anticipation of beginning again
I watch the flames wash over me
Is this happening?
Right here, right now?
This cannot be me
But the rising steam says
    something differently.

Her Father's Love
Anonymous

He took her away.
He took her away.
He wiled her, beguiled her
And took her away.

My daughter . . . so precious
Her world in such strife,
He told her he'd give her
A new lease on LIFE.

He took her away.
He took her away.
He promised her things
And took her away.

I begged and I pleaded,
But she would not hear.
I longed to be with her
And hold her so near.

He took her away.
He took her away.
He told her abortion was
The only way.

The new LIFE within her
Was ripped and was torn.
He took her away.
FOREVER I MOURN.

You Didn't Hear a Sound

Anonymous

he whose house is burning
Thinks all the world's aglow
His neighbor, eating dinner
May never even know.

And when my heart was lying
Shattered on the ground
I thought the world had ended
You didn't hear a sound.

Art

Anonymous

A BLACK area
A WHITE area

Talking BLACK
Talking WHITE

I'm waiting for a MIXED area

A multi-racial skin color . . .
so mixed that NO differences can be SEEN
Yellow
Red
White
Black
Brown

Mix them in your paint palette
A pleasing hue results

Blended
EQUAL

"Hearsay"

Anonymous

"What did he say?"
"What will you do?"
"Who went where?"

"Whose parents found out?"
"How many tickets?"
"Whose new car?"

He said, she said . . .
Shopping . . . hair
chewing gum (open mouthed)
"What college?"
"How drunk?"
I missed all of this.
I'm glad.

Me

Anonymous

A wistful look . . . that was me at 15.
Born an OLD SOUL . . . I looked
    forward to the future.
I would do better than my parents had
So, I married at a VERY MATURE 17.

Naive. Babies come right
    after you get married . . .
Not until I was 19.
Wife and MOMMY, worn like a crown.
Happy to be possessed (PROTECTED)
When does possession
    become OBSESSION?
WAR
lawyers WIN
Lives TORN
New beginnings . . .

Classes with the ages of my children
Instructors treat as if a CHILD.
Power corrupts some
A few still enthused with their career choice
Others, tenured, waiting to retire

I will teach.
Once wistful eyes now filled
    with unwelcome wisdoms
Finding miracles in small crevices
and unexpected TRIUMPHS.

Life is Too Short To Waste

Anonymous

A tragedy, a shocking blow,
Has happened in our lives.
This loss of life, affected all,
Children, men and wives.

To others, or to ourselves,
There's no way to explain.
We pray to God to make us strong
And help us with our pain.

Out of this rubble and debris
We'll not forget in haste
Just know this simple phrase for sure:
Life is too short to waste.

A Question, An Answer

Miguel Barron

A soft glow filled the small room sitting in front of a computer screen, a man stared fixedly at a blinking cursor. Music wafted through the room, filling the man with its melody. The music tickled the man's fancy and he broke into an easy smile.

Beside the computer was a framed picture of a smiling family. A radiant young woman balanced a toddler on her knee. Behind them stood a man, a hand resting on the shoulder of the smiling woman. A proud grin split the man's face, and his eyes shone in happiness.

The man at the computer stared deeply at the picture. Slowly, his hand began to move across the keyboard. He sighed as he stood and walked from the room.

The radio continued to play music, the soft melody replaced by a harsh instrumental. Beside the picture of the smiling family a single word broke the blue sea of the computer screen.

WHY. The moment the man had entered the word into the computer the computer began to try to find a definition for the word. Searching for the answer the computer accessed all of its files. First, the computer tried plugging the word into every math equation it had on file. It then cycled through its files on the laws of physics. Moments later the computer found that neither equation or law applied to this question. Next, the computer brought up its files on biological and psychological theory. The theory of evolution stalled before this one word, and Freud had thought of no suitable answer. Running out of options the computer tried its religious and philosophical files. Although both files answered many unknown answers, they did not solve this one word question.

The computers silicon brain worked to find a possible answer and came up with a reasonable process by which it could be accomplished. It combined all of its files. Slowly a change came over the computer, it began to actually ponder the question.

Music entered the room, an orchestra of numerous instruments. Its majestic symphony filled the room and something in the room appreciated it. And on the computer screen a single word answer sat under the single word question. BECAUSE. In the small room filled with the soft glow of a computer screen and the little radio, the computer began to ask its own questions.

Metal and Magic
Part 1

Miguel Barron

"Dad, it's time for supper." Stacey banged on the door twice, an exasperated look on her face.

"I'll be up in a minute," her father called from his basement workshop.

Stacey frowned as she turned from the door. Her father had been worrying her lately with his single-mindedness. He had spent the last day locked up in his workshop. Stacey feared that her father was having a problem at the Magical Institute. Her father frequently disagreed with the practices of the mages. She shivered as she thought of the mages: The memory of her first meeting with one of mages.

Ten years ago, at the age of five, Stacey had been in her room, playing with her dolls, when she heard a stranger's voice. She had walked into the living room in time to see her mother walk out the door. A short woman in a long black robe was staring at her father. Her dad had just stood there, a lost look on his face. The woman turned her head and stared intently at Stacey. Under the power of that gaze, Stacey had begun to cry.

"Is something wrong, Stace?"

Stacey jumped at the sound of the unexpected voice.

"I'm sorry, did I startle you?"

Her father stood in the doorway, a weary smile adorning his grimy face.

"You didn't startle me. I was just thinking," Stacey said sheepishly.

"I've never seen anyone think so violently," her father said with a soft laugh. "I'm going to go wash up, make sure you don't think yourself through the ceiling."

As her father left the kitchen, Stacey gazed thoughtfully at the door to the workshop. She could hear her father's footsteps as he walked up the stairs. She needed to know what was wrong with him. The workshop might hold the answer. She hesitantly opened the door and carefully walked down the darkened steps. Stacey walked over to one of the lanterns hanging on the nearby wall. She pressed a finger to the lantern, concentrating in the way her mother had taught her long ago. The lantern lit instantly.

A large table dominated the workshop. Something lay on the table, underneath a heavy blanket. Stacey bit her lip as she pulled the blanket from the table.

Under the blanket was what appeared to be a giant suit of armor. Her father was not a blacksmith, the why of the armor was a mystery. Stacey pressed a hand against the breastplate. It didn't feel empty. She lifted the visor of the helmet and saw a mass of wiring and tiny gears. Two green gems gleamed like eyes in the visor.

Stacey drew the blanket back over the armor. She backed away from the table, a confused look on her face. Suddenly, she remembered her father. He would be done cleaning up soon. Quickly snuffing out the lantern, she took one last look at the table. When she reached the kitchen, her eyes widened in surprise.

"We need to talk, Stace." Her father sat at the table calmly eating his dinner.

Stacey gaped in shock at her father.

"Did I startle you or are you just thinking?" her father smiled.

"Dad, I d-didn't . . ."

"Stacey, will you just sit down and eat your dinner?" her father said patiently.

Stacey sat across from her father and stared at her plate.

"Father, are you angry with me?" Stacey asked apprehensively.

"No, Stacey, I am not angry."

"What's going on, Dad?"

"Stace, I'm in trouble," he said with a sigh.

"What? Why?" Stacey looked fearfully at him.

"I've built a robot."

"A robot! Dad robots are outlawed. All technology is outlawed." Stacey couldn't believe it. Her father was building a robot, an offense punishable with death. Robots had been outlawed after the Mage War. "Why would you build a robot?"

"Stacey, you have been chosen by the mage," her father said softly.

Stacey was speechless. Once the chosen were taken from their homes, they were never heard from again. Rumors abounded about the strongest of the chosen becoming mage. They disappeared forever.

"H-how do you know Dad," Stacey stuttered.

"Mage Area told me," her father said sadly.

"Mom," Stacey exclaimed. "Mom told you?"

"She is no longer your mother, Stacey." Her father rubbed his forehead tiredly with his hand. "A mage has no family."

"Then why would she warn you?" Stacey couldn't believe it. Her father had not spoken of her mother since that day years ago.

"She didn't warn me," her father said. "She was gloating, Stace."

"But . . .," Stacey began to ask one of the many questions she had on her mind.

"No more questions," her father said. "Go to your room and get a travelling bag ready. The mage can read the chosen's minds. They know you know."

"Dad, how are you going to activate the robot?"

Her father either didn't hear her or ignored her question. He hurried to his workshop.

Stacey slowly rose from the table, shaking uncontrollably.

Stacey sat on her bed packing a backpack with clothes. Tears ran down her cheeks. The last couple of hours had been a shock. Her fathers words still haunted her. Could a mage be reading her thoughts right now. She shivered despite herself.

She despaired when she thought of the mage. There was no possible way that she could hide from the mage. Her father had probably planned on finding someway to activate the robot. Stacey knew that it was a false hope. She had learned from history class that the only way to activate a robot was through magic, and no mage would willingly activate a robot.

Stacey quickly closed the bag and hopped off the bed. She hurried downstairs and came to a stop when she entered the kitchen. Her blood ran cold when she saw the man in the flowing black robe. Her father stood in front of the mage, putting Stacey behind him.

The mage turned his head and stared at Stacey.

"Stacey Nor is chosen," a raspy voice escaped from the large black hood. "You will come with me child, by order of Mage Ontlo."

The voice pulled at Stacey, making her feel compelled to follow its source. She took a step toward the mage.

"No, Stacey," her father yelled as he tried to hold her back.

"You were warned not to interfere Mr. Nor," the mage said as he lifted an arm.

Stacey screamed as her father was propelled

backward through the workshop door. Wood splintered across the room. Stacey began to cry when she heard her father fall down the stairs. Stacey hurried down the stairs and ran to her father.

"You have a moment to pay your respects," Mage Ontlo called after her.

Her father lay motionless on the bottom step. Stacey wept profusely as she cradled her father. The fall had broken his neck. Stacey wept as she wondered why this was happening to her.

"You will come now, child," the mage ordered from the kitchen.

At the sound of the voice, Stacey gently lowered her father to the floor. She ran over to the table and pulled the covering from what had been her father's last hope. Having no idea what she was doing, she placed her hand on the robot's chest and concentrated, the way her mother had taught her years ago. She gasped as a sharp stinging sensation filled her body. Sweat beaded on her forehead and the pain became unbearable, then disappeared, and Stacey fell unconscious to the floor.

The mage slowly came down the stairs. The low hum of spinning gears echoed through the room. A shape rose from the table. The shapes metal joints creaked as they bent for the first time. A pair of glowing green eyes fixed the mage with an intent stare. The creature moved.

Untitled

Jane Bebar

A picture of you found me yesterday.
I seem to recall an angry day;
All images of you turned to ash.
Ten winters ago you, the man
    on the pedestal,
suddenly stood only one foot
above my 4'll".
My hero, demoted to a simple mortal.
Betrayal shattered the family
    you helped create
and disappointment filled your biggest fan.
But somehow, this single image
escaped that gruesome mount of ash.
Did a minute piece of my being want
    the burden
of remembrance?
And what type?
Stinging tears caused by memories of joy or
Tears of disappointment caused by
    inevitable reality that
true heroes exist only in storybooks?

Lighthouse

Mary Bowden

A lonely, lofty, red-topped tower
sitting on a grassy knoll,
sends out a luminous streak
to the gloom of the dark sky
that guides the ships in the murky, aqua sea.

The Lumberjack
Sam Burke

he breathes in the morning air deep,
an almost steady stream of sweat
runs from his chin, escaping his body
too hot for his actions
shirt fully saturated, insulates,
in a time of war

vision blurred sawdust cuts his eye,
    watering
he rips hard through trees,
born far before his birth,
with his rip-toothed twenty four inch
saw tooth gas guzzling killing machine,
he rips in,
woodchips burst from tree flesh,
like a twenty-five foot fountain of blood,
trees anchor firm for their lives
birds dash,
screaming like exiles in war blasts,

he carries tree flesh piled on shoulders,
stacks it in full capacity in the
eight-foot Hurst truck bed,
like bodies on an ox cart,
goes back to rip through more hard,
veins rising up through muscle almost
bursting through skin,
like a savage,
he rips through, slices, hacks,
dismembers appendages,
scalps
crushed colonial skin on bone,
but worse—
executing an ecosystem

Six Stilts
Sam Burke

Splitting firewood with friends,
an old oak we cut up,
fallen prey to ants and a windstorm

Slouched in a chair,
resting, sweating
hands resentful of this old dull ax,
rusted, unground
A long legged spider climbs
eloquently,
on six stilts,
vertical,
stops for a long drink
from my saturated shirt

Its explorations resume
around my torso, arms,
light footsteps tickle my neck,
exploring for what?

A friend speaks:
Still! a spider on you!
slaps it down,

I say nothing

Large Thorn Piercing
Sam Burke

Installing a large tree,
losing grip, a large thorn
pierces, embedding two inches
into my shoulder's flesh
birds will seek shelter among these thorns,
and the tree will protect itself with them,
understanding purpose, I extract it lovingly
pain - pleasing

Jawbone
Sam Burke

thank God pop made sure
all the fuckin guns were out of the house,
I would have been happy to drive
    my jawbone
into the white drywall ceiling,
a good backdrop it would have made
for my tormenting biology,
scattered like modern abstract
    impressionism,
in hues and tones of
supposed salt-deficient synapses.
would have decorated the room well
from the red color wheel,
but putting some through the cleanup duty,
made me think twice

Walking Together
Sam Burke

walking together past the sign
saying do not walk here,
down a path turning meets another,
which direction
we are together,
either one is good

down along the river
an old man fishing
Jesus on his radio
a quiet bell on the tip of his pole
awaiting the sound of a catfish tug
dead lonely campfire
alive in a night, in my mind,
around that fire, grandfather spoke
    fearlessly of death.
a gray squirrel trapezes through
the pendulous silver maple branches,
    dancing
a robin leaps -
an eye penetrates

Eleven
Jessica Canupp

I was scared
of somehow absorbing
unidentifiable
substances

through my skin
and it attacked my
brain
interrupting my
compulsion
till it turned
to obsession
making me
cry
till salt
turned into
blood

Untitled
Erica Coffey

Fuck it
That's my motto
whenever I don't
get something
the way I
like it
I say
Fuck it
I pretend
that I don't care
it prevents me
from having to try
any harder than
I dare

Jerry's kids
Erica Coffey

Kesey, Cassady, Pigpen, and heart
That's where the family
first got it's start
It wandered and travelled
and floated for years
Then one day came down
in a river of tears
Captain trips had ascended
and left a barren land
to play in the sky
with Uncle John's Band
leaving a legacy far unsurpassed
no matter how well
Phish can play Stash
The love and the life
of his travelling show
only in memory now
can continue to grow
Thank you, Jerry, and all of your friends,
because of your music
I'll never pretend.

Untitled
Erica Coffey

The rebel yell
is loud but short
because eventually

it is muffled by
the sound of
rules and tradition
regardless of
how many people signed the petition

They piss me off!
I've tried to go around them
I've tried going under
Sometimes I ignore them
It always leads me asunder
You can contest them
And you can complain
But there's really no point
In straining your brain
No matter how ridiculous
Or unreasonable
Rules are rules
And inflexible

Untitled

Erica Coffey

Mister
Al Gore's
Donations
Need
Explanations
Someday
Soon

Many
Alligator's
Drowning on
Nobody
Else's
Sinking
Ship

Marching
Ants
Dance around
Noisy
Elephant's
Stance.
Sanity dies

Melting
your face when I'm on acid
Annoying
flies bussing around my head
Depressing
people who wish they were dead
Nearing
the end of sanity
Exciting
the intoxicating smell of wine
Sad
my mother died
Suspicious
my father lied

A Schizophrenic's Lament
Erica Gallagher

And in the frame of brilliance
Something even more intense is exposed
The clock refused all the time in the world
Its hands too lazy to move
Its gears too rusty to wind.
And in the company of atrocity
Things even God can't explain
Take place indiscreetly, under your nose
But so unapparent that they are lost
In the threshold of someone underqualified.
So the wars break out in heaven
Angels of hope are on lockdown
Demons are rioting and hissing
Someone downstairs is very happy
When something upstairs is missing.

Fall
Erica Gallagher

Here I go. . .
Nature has a way
With a delicate leaf
Who doesn't want to fall
Just to be gathered with others.
I want to be that last standing leaf
On the tree of individuality, and I will.
There is really nothing even nature
Can do to throw me off with my
Plan to criticize the endeavor
Of a season of death and
A season of rebirth.
As I always said,
Let someone
Else fall.

Theme for a Ghost
Erica Gallagher

And it's not the autumn
And it's not the winter
And . . .
Wait, it's not a season
It's a vital sign
No, this is not your problem
Yes, this problem is mine.

No, I'm not a demon
Likewise I'm no angel
Yet . . .
You imagine me in purgatory
The most restless of eternities
You picked a good time
To give me this disease.

Yes, I am a sinner
And yes, I have done wrong
So now . . .
You face up to a common guilt!
No one is as pure as a grain
Of virgin sand on the beach
That's never been washed by the rain.

Wedding
Erica Gallagher

She has long skinny fingers,
And that's okay and all
Really, I admire that
Because, hey, she can pick at you with them
For the rest of your life.

She wears only gold
And not too much, you know
I don't think she wants to be noticed
Love enough will hold her over
    until tomorrow
When you place that shiny band
    around her skinny finger.

She's compulsive about her status
Maybe she won't even agree
To change her last name
But when you're making those vows
Is she feminist or monotonous?

And I am here sitting
Hands folded watching her maid of honor
Fluff her beautiful white train
And I wonder, why her, not me?
With all seriousness, I want to laugh.

Undefined Manifesto
Erica Gallagher

Ordinary
So very ordinary,
Don't you want to follow my trend
Or be my friend
Or be my shadow
Is that too shallow
For a deep rooted turnip
Like you?

Undefined,
So undefined like silence
Or unmistaken slurs
As your whole life blurs
Maybe you wish you'd
Have stuck to things with attitude
But you're a deep rooted bulb
With no intention of becoming a food.

Oh little,
Little, tiny, fuzzy rabbit
Can't you shake your pride
Always making the tortoise hide
Away from your insulting stride
Thank heaven
For creature with enough sense
To disregard
Ordinary, undefined little bunnies.

Man
Erica Gallagher

You are not a fighter
So walk away before I grab you
And pull you into the ring with me.

You're not an animal
So turn around before I destroy
And hunt you like wild game.

You are not half-a-man
So surrender and put down your pride
Men don't need to be told what to do.

A Foster Kid's Revenge
Lola Gish

They made sure you were content
That your life was well spent
Had your eggs and sausage cooked
Got all your appointments booked
Took better care of you than you understood
Loved you when you were bad or good
Took interest in your future aspirations
Gave you encouraging conversations
Put you through a private school
Saw you mess up and acted real cool
Even after the years of being a screw up
They really believed that you grew up
They paved your road with magic wands
And paid for your love with saving bonds
Every morning they walked you to the bus
But they forgot about us.

Killer Stone
Lola Gish

Bob Dylan was a cry of hope
A million voices reside in him
He wants the nation to cope
As the nation slowly dim.

Holy roller, went down that worn path
Jesus Christ is never going to be alone
He made us cry He made us laugh
He is a rock, a Killer Stone.

Killer Stone, the very last needle on the pine,
He's not going out like that - no way
Jim Morrison writes a poem over wine
And it took him a month and a day.

Double-Cross
Lola Gish

I walked in the room, tapped his shoulder
Said, "hello" and had a seat.
He noticed only one of us
He noticed himself.
As if the mirror were his only friend
The only thing he longed to impress.
The mirror can't turn away
And tell him "good-bye."
But I can
And so can anyone else he crosses
I don't want to cross him
And I don't want to wave to him any longer
But I'd appreciate something more
Out of him
Especially when he expects me
To come over and worship.

Untitled

Chris Helin

She opens her eyes in the morning-yet-still dark room to check the time on the alarm clock. Six a.m. She is groggy from a restless night's sleep, but she knows that soon she'll be just fine. While most people rely on their morning jolt of java to bring them to life, she has her own ritual, her "secret" as she calls it, to start her day off right.

She rolls out of bed and throws on a day old t-shirt and sweatpants. In the darkness, she doesn't realize that her shirt is inside-out, but it matters little to the birds or loose dogs or half-awake motorists she might come across.

Not wanting to wake anyone, she leaves the lights out and lets her hands guide her down the stairway. She instinctively finds her way to the coat closet, pulls a sweatshirt over her pillow-haired head, and laces on her well-worn shoes. Finally, with headset in place, she goes out into the dark stillness of another morning.

She's a runner this and every morning, and has been for as long as she can remember. She started simply as a way to get in shape, but over the years it became much more.

The familiar rhythm of each foot hitting the pavement carries her down the block and around the corner to the entrance of her neighborhood. Beyond the confines of the little world she lives in and the many roles she plays, she can be herself.

Now she is free, detached, yet secure. More alone than at any other time, but never lonely. As she finds an old U2 tune on the radio, her breathing becomes effortless, perfectly synchronized with each stride.

In a split second she decides to take her residential route today. She'll pass two dog-walkers, a few newspaper-fetchers in bathrobes, and an occasional employee warming his or her work-beater. Other days, when she takes her rural route, her only distractions are eight oblivious cows and the ever-changing beauty of a midwestern landscape.

Around the bend of a deteriorating sidewalk, into a brisk north wind, she readies herself for the blast of cold, confident that she can withstand it, as she has so many times before. The brutal challenges that the elements can pose bring out the conqueror in her, just as they have in adventurers throughout time. For now she's like the wind that pounds against her, only stronger.

Another mile passes. Thoughts of the day ahead . . . plans for the weekend . . . push her forward, always forward, down these long roads, her roads.

Out here she is more than who others expect her to be - mother, wife, friend, student, employee. She answers to no one, relies on nothing except her own dedication and two strong legs.

As she nears her final turn, with heart racing and blood pulsing, she is alive in every sense of the word. She slows to a halt, relishing the pleasant tingling in her wellworked legs. Her mind is alert and perceptive - as clear as the newly dawned sky.

As she stretches, she can't help but smile. Who would ever have thought that this most basic of human actions has the power to strengthen, renew, even transform not only the body but the soul?

This God-given gift, to run each day, has shown her what she's made of, who she is , and who she will always strive to be. This is her humble celebration of ability and her prayer of gratitude for life and health and two strong legs.

She opens the door to her home, now ready to take on her duties and responsibilities, even the world. She'll carry her secret with her and it will help carry her through another day. Until tomorrow.

Then she'll do it again.

Silent Loving

Chris Helin

You absorb me with your eyes-
I sign as you adore me.
We linger here for but a moment
Cherishing our time of euphoric admiration for one another.

Picnic

Shirlene Holden

A bottle of
Chardonnay

A basket of
tulips
red, yellow, pink

Enjoying our lunch of
Brie with French and sourdough bread.

Those special finishing touches that only compliment our love.

Untitled

Shirlene Holden

Bitter words
Heard, but ignored

Speak out, softly

Haunting memories
Fistful arguments
Disregarded opinions

Speak out, softly

Loved, but abused
Worshipped, yet abased
Yet I never

Speak out, softly.

Cublings' Find

Lissa M. Joachim

*Note to the reader: * marks indicate "sending," a sort of mental telepathy.*

The sun hadn't even fully set when Moonstar was peeking from under her furs. She liked waking early to see the fading sunlight make way for the darker colors of the night. Twilight was her favorite time of day. The crickets were whirring below and, nearby, an owl began to hoot softly.

Moonstar kicked her furs aside, further burying her still-sleeping brother, who mumbled and rolled over. She dressed quickly and grabbed her spear, silently crawling out of her den onto the tree branch. Without stirring so much as a single leaf, she hopped from branch to branch until she was able to drop to the ground. She landed on her hands and knees, her spear skittering to the side. She shook her head, tossing her blonde curls. Soft send-laughter made her turn to look behind her as she straightened, picking up her fallen spear.

You think to leave without me? Silvertide asked, one eyebrow raised. A small pack was slung over her shoulder and Moonstar knew it contained breakfast. She smiled brightly at her friend.

"Of course not," she said quietly. "Let's hurry. We have to be back before everyone else is up and looking for us.

Often, Silvertide would accompany Moonstar in the late evenings. They would make the relatively short trip to the beach, then climb the rocky cliffs to a small overhang halfway up. There, they would simply watch the sun set and the dolphins swimming far out from shore. Silvertide would watch diligently for the slaptail pods that signaled the change of the seasons. The climb wasn't easy and Chieftess Redwind had forbidden anyone to venture onto the beach alone but each justified it by having the other along so they wouldn't be alone. Still, they never made it a point to mention their frequent trips to the adults or the Elders.

Look! Silvertide pointed below them where several giant hardshells where making their way to the water. *They've nests nearby and it's breeding season.*

"Let's bring back some eggs! Then we can collect capnuts on our way back," Moonstar added with a smile.

The pair scrambled down the cliff and across the beach. After chasing the hardshells further into the water, they dug about in the sand until they found the nests of soft, white eggs. Suddenly, Silvertide stopped, staring intently into the hole she'd just dug. Her hands were covered in sand up to the elbows.

"What is it?" asked Moonstar, coming over to stand next to her. With a yank, Silvertide pulled on the rusty metal chain buried in the sand and Moonstar gasped.

From the half-rusted links of metal hung a beautiful silver medallion. It was smooth and shiny, unworn nor rusted. The metal curved and twisted in the form of an elf which seemed to dance on the metal waves woven in behind it. The setting sun glinted off the thing.

It's beautiful!

"It's elven!" Moonstar exclaimed, softly fingering the charm as big as her closed fist. "But old, it can't be ours. Do you suppose a troll lost it?"

Why would a troll have such a thing? With elves on it? Besides, they never come out on the beach.

Suddenly aware of how low the sun had gotten, Silvertide slipped the chain into her bag, and they sprinted across the sand and up into

the treeline. Without making a sound, they worked their way to the base of the mountain, where the trees began to grow tall. Without warning, Quickstep and Whisperfall, two of the elves' wolf-friends, ran past them in a blur. The girls stepped back out of the way, stunned.

"Wha-?!" Moonstar gasped. The wolf-send that cried back was frantic as the animals raced for the holt to warn the waking tribe.

Humans! Hunters! Coming here!

Silvertide and Moonstar looked at each other then, in a swift movement, jumped up to catch a low hanging branch. They scrambled higher into the tree. Not moving, their large, pointed ears strained to catch a sound of the approaching humans. In the far distance, they could hear twigs snapping as the awkward five-fingers stumbled through the forest. An angry shout sounded, sending the cubs hurrying through the trees.

Below them, the wolves doubled back to lead the humans away from the holt. Silvertide bit her lip and hugged her pack closer as she gracefully ran along the branches. If they were discovered missing before they got back, Chieftess Redwind would have their hides. The sounds of the humans grew louder behind them.

Why aren't they following the wolves? Moonstar sent, panicked. She turned to look behind her. Not looking where she was going, her foot slipped and, with a loud cry, she tumbled to the forest floor. Silvertide immediately stopped and knelt on the branch, leaning over to peer at her friend. Moonstar sat up, holding her arm, a grimace of pain on her face. At the sound of hooves, she threw herself back to the ground. The stag's hooves barely missed her head as it bounded over her.

Moonstar! Silvertide frantically thought of something she could do. The humans were after the stag, not the demons' holt, but it would do no good for the hunters to happen onto the both of them and she knew she wasn't strong enough to carry Moonstar up into the safety of the trees.

Without warning, the stag reappeared, making Moonstar scramble out of the way. She cried out when she landed once more on her injured arm. An arrow flew through the air from the direction the stag had returned. It landed home in the side of its head and it fell over, skidding to a stop against a far tree.

Tiren appeared between the trees, reaching behind him for another arrow, his bow grasped firmly in his other hand, and his face grave. Moving quickly, he threw the bow over his shoulder and scooped up Moonstar. Cradling her close, he jumped for the trees motioning for Silvertide to come to him.

"Shh," he whispered. "Most likely, they'll think it's one of their arrows that felled the stag. Stupid five-fingers." Waving them back against the trunk of the tree, they waited.

The elf-cubs shuddered at the sight of the drably dressed, tall ones. Tiren sent them a sharp glance. When the hunters became too absorbed in retrieving their kill, he led the girls quietly away. Once at a safe distance, he stopped and used his shirt to fashion a sling for Moonstar's arm. Then, lifting her on his back and with Silvertide following close behind, Tiren headed for the holt.

By now, the moons had risen and the whole tribe had been fully wakened by the wolves' warning. Halfway back, they met with a small party of elves on their wolves. Chieftess Redwind slid from the back of one huge wolf and ran to them.

"Where have you been?" she asked, checking over Moonstar. "The three of you gave us quite a scare!"

Moonstar looked over her shoulder at

Silvertide, who shrugged her small shoulders. Both girls had assumed he'd been sent after them. Moonstar was given over to the healer, and Tiren turned to face his chieftess, his hand over her daughter's shoulder. For a long moment, everyone was silent. Redwind raised an eyebrow.

"Well?"

"The girls wanted to go hunting for hardshell eggs. Your rule was they shouldn't go alone. We were coming to warn you of the humans when Moonstar fell."

"Fine, but you should know better, Tiren," Redwind admonished. "You should have told someone where you where off to." Tiren nodded, accepting her reprimand. Suddenly, Silvertide dug into her bag. There was a collective gasp when she held up the chain and medallion. "This is elven. Where did you find it?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

On the beach, buried. Silvertide told her, mother. *It's old. I don't believe it's of the trolls work, either.*

Tucking the chain into her belt, Redwind turned to the hunters that had accompanied her looking for one of the Elders. "Oakthorn, find the others and call Pack Council. Now . . ."

To be continued . . .

Vision

Nicci Knable

An ignorant man
Had hatred you see
Because he was blind
Hate was all he could be
But this man in no way
Was vision impaired
It was his heart that was blind
And he never cared
This man could not see
Past clothing or skin
Therefore he was blind
To all beauty within
Sadly enough
This story is true
But this man is no stranger
In fact he is you
This blind hatred is what
Keeps all men apart
So in order to see
You must open your heart
And always remember
Though eyes may be wide
Beauty is unseen
For it comes from inside.

Lost

Nicci Knable

In the world
There is a land
In the land
There is a tree
In the tree
There is a girl
In that girl is me
In me there's a meaning
So far it's left unfound
The reality remains unknown
Until my feet touch ground

Night Commute
Bonnie Kodrick

The red-eyes flash before me,
the white-eyes charge in-bound
fighting a sunset war
on the asphalt battleground.

Slinging laser arrows,
throwing lighted spears-
wounding for an instant,
shedding exhausted tears.

Fighting for position
on a disappearing plane,
running with my comrades
at the opposing urbane.

Surrendering to peace
awaiting me at home
dreading was at sunrise
radar palindrome.

Alice?
Bonnie Kodrick

Craving flight
one can never, never land.
Supine fogs evaporate
into zenith clouds,
soiling vision.

Veering impulsively
through looking glasses.
Silver images dissolving
into virtual reality,
claiming victims.

Untitled
Bonnie Kodrick

She says I have to get up and go to church because it is Ash Wednesday. I must have ashes spread on my forehead so that I can be reminded that I not only came from dust but that I am destined to return to dust. I don't quite understand how smearing dirt on my face is going to affect my soul, but better to comply than to listen to sermons the entire day! She always wants me to stay clean, and now she wants someone to dirty my face, all for the sake of salvation. God, will I never understand what she is talking about!

As I rake the comb through the tangles which the night has given to me, I stare out the window at old Rosie. Already, she is swinging her tail to swish away the flies. There are so many of them so early in the season. I'll just bet that I spend most of the summer down at Short Creek Branch. This isn't a bad thing, because swinging from the tree rope to the middle of the stream is like going on the carnival rides at the Fourth-of-July picnic at the church. But falling into the water scares me. Sometimes I wonder if the water is going to still be there when I get there. I welcome the cool hardness of the water on the soles of my feet. As I am swallowed by the stream, my body greets relief from the heat.

My pink cotton dress is my favorite. It is almost worth going to church to get to wear it. It is so carefully pressed into smoothness. I cautiously lift the perfection over my head, savoring the smell of starch as I slide it down my arms. I fasten the five rose buttons that bind my gown and twirl around to watch the skirt form circles in the air. I sit down, putting on my Mary Janes and Buster Browns—and because I'm a little dizzy. I play with the buckles

on the shiny shoes, imagining that my prince is kneeling before me in supreme adoration of my flawlessness.

She's calling me again, telling me to hurry or we'll be late and have to walk into church with everyone staring. So? I don't know why she worries about somebody looking at us. People look at trees, and dogs, and the sky. Why shouldn't they look at us? We're here.

I hurry down the stairs, pausing to give Cat a quick pat. He stretches himself out the entire length of the step, closing his eyes to the intruding world. I don't speak. He isn't listening anyway. I jump past the last three steps onto the small rug, landing right on target.

Mother smiles absentmindedly at me as she scans my appearance for forgotten closings or gaudy additions. She smells of lilacs and biscuits and soap. She arranges the familiar white hat to fit on top of the knot of brown hair which she has fastened with a large barrette. I watch her tiny hands surrounded in lace gloves and secretly long that someday the delicate beauty will be mine. I am all legs and arms and unruly hair. Now, lace would tear if I attempted to put it on hands soft from mud-play but with fingernails hooked and jagged from digging and scraping.

The ride to church is filled with wind and sounds blown in through the truck's windows. The fences disappear as quickly as they appear, and the smells of new crops do not linger long enough to distinguish one from the other. The white houses we pass are the same—only the windows and doors change positions. Occasionally, a creature darts across the road or runs through the fields into an old barn. We do not speak—the world talks for us.

I remember when we drove these roads to bury my brother. She said it was God's will that he died and that I should accept it. Now, why would God want my brother to die? Why would God not want my brother to stay here and live with us? Why would God not want my brother to feel the wind and the sunshine and the rain? She could not answer these questions, probably because they had no answers.

I glance across the seat at her, wondering if she is also remembering. She does not cry, but there are lines around her mouth that look like they were washed there by tears. Sometimes she is so far away that I feel like I should call her to come back and sit down beside me. I wish they could make a pill that could make all the sad things better for her. Maybe she would stay here with me instead of thinking herself somewhere else.

A butterfly swooshes in through the window and knocks against the seat beside me. It is yellow with black lines intricately traced along its wings. It is temporarily stilled by the collision. Its body seems uncolorful and ugly beside the delicate, powder-puff wings. I am afraid that if I try to grab it, I might tear the tender sail. How do such dainty wings support so much unsightly weight? As it slowly begins to flutter, I wait with my help. With a great flapping, it lifts itself to freedom. I watch it quickly disappear as we move away—all yellow and black, only its beauty seen from the distance.

We are slowing now as we approach the house where God lives. It sure is big—i guess God must need lots of room to keep track of all of us. The church spire reaches into the sky like an index finger pointing our way to heaven. I hope my brother isn't too lonesome there. I hope God tells him jokes and plays games with him. I would like to see my brother, but I don't want to die to do it.

The people getting out of the cars begin to dot the sidewalks in front of the church. They

smile, they greet, they look at us as we pull up. Some turn toward us; some turn away, continuing their talks of cows and chickens and canning peaches. The flower-ladies bouquet themselves into colorful circles, exchanging wisdoms and wishes.

Afterward, I shall go home with my dirty forehead, full of grace and good will. It seems to make her happy, this outward sign that I have religion. She will begin her rituals and I will begin mine. She is my mother, and I will one day be her.

Dusting Bunnies

Bonnie Kodrick

Gossamer rabbits float away
from yellow cotton fingers
which reach into corners
across the wooden floor.

A few, too close, surrender
caught together in the tips
of binding strings which
grasp the transparent fur.

Some scurry to freedom
into the forest bed
springing into the softness
of the bulking branches.

Hopping tales of cotton
spoors in bedroom dreams
dust in dust, already
dead before alive.

Who, What, When, Where, How

Bonnie Kodrick

Decisions, decisions
poem or prose
cee or dee.
Decide, decide
god help me!

Decision, decisions
rhyme or reason
pass or fail.
Decide, decide
to no avail.

Decision, decisions
conventions or freedoms
win or lose.
Decide, decide
I can choose?

Decision, decisions
save or jettison
print or tear.
Decide, decide
Put it where?

Matin Cat

Bonnie Kodrick

The sun cat-walked
through the window
slipping white into the folds of the morning,
kneading a Persian rug
into a comfortable resting place
for the created day.

The light-paws padded
toward the ceiling,
dragging the day behind.
The blanching beams
chased wallflower mice,
trailing black tails saved for shadows.

Rushing to Conquer Our Fears

Rebecca Lafond

"Wait a minute! Where am I? How in the hell did I get here?" I thought to myself, as the shock of reality slammed me right into my gut. Every nerve in my body was on overload, as I realized it was too late; fate was in motion. What had I gotten myself into? I felt like I was no longer in control of my own destiny (like I ever was) and my whole existence felt threatened.

I could feel perspiration, but it was by no means hot. I was sitting on the bare metal floor of an extremely cold, cramped airplane. A seatbelt (if you can call it that, there were no seats) wrapped under my arms and tightly clasped my chest. The plane climbed steep and fast, and although there were several small windows and we could see through the clear plastic door, all that I could see was the rushing white from the claustrophobic clouds.

I couldn't move an inch sandwiched in between the legs of the man behind me and the man in front of me sandwiched in between mine. On my right were more people strapped to that side of the airplane, thirteen in all.

We were all dressed in one-piece, solid-color coveralls with harnesses over backs and encircling our chests, which wrapped around our arms and legs. They fit snug, pulling back our shoulders and forcing us to be posture perfect. We all wore instruments strange to me on the back of our left hands. They were held in place by a loop around our middle two fingers. It looked like a large watch, but there was only one hand moving slowly around the dial.

For a split second I thought I must be dreaming or at least I held a small hope that it was only a dream. Everything was so obscure to me; I couldn't believe I had let myself get into such a predicament.

You are probably thinking I was being kidnapped or taken hostage, but I assure you the terror I was experiencing was purely voluntary. That's right; I even paid for the adventure. We were all about to confront our fears and jump out of a perfectly good airplane for fun. Maybe jump isn't the right word in my case; I wonder if I could have voluntarily plummeted myself into the unknown had someone not been right behind me to give me a little push.

I felt an immense tension intensely growing inside me with each foot we climbed through the air. My mind raced, trying to figure out how to get through this with the slightest bit of dignity. Would I remember everything I was supposed to do? Would I freak out and lose control? Would I even remain conscious or maybe I would pass out from the shear fear of facing death head-on?

"No, I can do this." I told myself, "I'm tough; I'm strong. I've been through natural childbirth five times. I can do anything!" The pep talk didn't help. In fact, I was wasting valuable time; I should have been rehearsing the steps that I

was taught in the one hour class to prepare me for this death-defying feat.

I looked down at the altimeter on my wrist. The hand pointed to 5.5 and to my amazement I remembered to flash five, five with my fingers. This was just the practice cue to deploy the parachute. Handling this tiny task gave me a bit of confidence I desperately needed. Now if I could only remember this signal while falling 120 miles an hour.

I looked at my sister-in-law sitting next to me and we gave each other a smile followed by a nervous laugh. A couple of people ahead of us sat my brother and my boyfriend; they were smiling at each other also. I think we were all scared beyond words, but there is absolutely no way we would let our fear be sensed by each other.

We were now flying at 10,000 feet, and our instructors motioned for us to rise to our knees. I took off my seatbelt and while on my knees backed into position to be fastened to my instructor. He secured our harnesses together, first upper left then lower, next upper right then lower. As he checked each clasp and pin, he called out, when each was secure. I put on my goggles and a leather helmet that fastened under my chin.

Next we practiced through the series of tasks we were to perform, as we plunged one thousand feet every five seconds. I would have about thirty seconds to go through a series of motions, keep track of my altitude, give the five, five signal and pull the ripcord. Somehow I think they gave us these things to perform trying to give us a sense of control when in reality things would seem exactly the opposite. About now I needed a real pep talk.

We were now about 14,000 feet and well above the clouds. The sun was burning bright and reflecting off the shiny aluminum plane. It seemed as if we had flown a million miles, but how far could we go when flying in circles for fifteen minutes.

When they pulled the door open overhead, I could see nothing but the white rushing clouds. Where was the airport? Where were the people? It seemed as if no one but us existed, and we now knew what if felt like to be in the twilight zone.

The first five skydivers jumped by themselves as soon as the door opened. To my amazement they didn't even hesitate. Now there remained just the four of us first time jumpers with our instructors. We were all on our knees inching our way toward the open door. I could feel my heart in my throat thumping wildly. Every fiber of my being was electric with anticipation.

First to jump was my boyfriend. My brother was next, after turning around with his instructor attached to give his wife a farewell kiss. Then my sister-in-law followed. They were all gone; the clouds had swallowed them. I felt a sinking dolor as they plunged out of sight into the white abyss.

Fate had arrived; it was now my turn; we were the only ones left to dive. Inch by inch on our knees we shuffled to the rushing white sky. I was numb with terror; I wasn't me; I couldn't be. At the very last second I could see the ground and it assured me I was still on earth (so to speak), and I would be ok.

The next thing I knew I heard my instructor say "Ok, arch!" and with my head back and knees bent we were soaring through the air. I think I tried to scream but nothing would emerge. Maybe the gale force of the wind pushed my screams of terror through my body and my toes were screaming. Not likely, but my sense of reality had blown away, and was now somewhere floating in a cloud.

My instructor tapped me on the head. This was the cue to begin the awareness tasks we had rehearsed. When I finally realized I was still conscious, we had already fallen 3 thousand feet.

I put both arms out with elbows bent at a 90 degree angle. Looking at my left hand I checked the altimeter; the hand moved very fast now and read 10, which meant we were at 10,000 feet. Looking around as we escaped the clouds, I looked up, to the left, right and then down. I couldn't see anyone else from our group and the ground seemed so far away.

The roaring wind deafened not only my hearing but also my perception. I couldn't remember what I was supposed to do next. My instructor took my right hand and placed it on the ripcord. I should have been checking the ripcord's position, so that I could find it when we were at 5,500 feet. I stretched my left hand above my head and my right on the ripcord. I repeated this two more times just to be sure of the placement.

Back in a "Y" position, I checked my altimeter once again. We were now at about 6,500 feet and falling. My instructor showed me how to maneuver my body to turn to the right and then to the left. It seemed absolutely simple, but I really have no idea what we did.

I looked at the altimeter again and it read 5.5. I gave the five, five flashes with my fingers. I was so relieved that I had remembered the cue, that for a split second I forgot the significance of the signal. The ground started rushing at me; I reached for the ripcord, but a harness strap was in the way. I tried again and this time success, relief, elation and every other emotion I could feel at the same time.

A hush came upon the whole world or at least my world for the moment. My instructor asked if I were all right.

"What a rush!" I said.

He laughed.

He controlled the direction we flew, while I took out a disposable camera out of the pocket on my upper left sleeve of my jumpsuit. My sister-in-law came fairly close to us and I was able to take her picture. She looked ecstatic. It was so nice to see a friendly, familiar face.

After snapping a few more pictures, I put the camera back and took hold of the straps that controlled the parachute. We practiced the arm positions for controlling the chute for landing.

"Put your arms up pull the straps down to your chest and then all the way down and lock your elbows," he instructed.

It was amazing how we slowed our descent almost to a stop in midair. After practicing this a couple more times, we then circled to the left and then right. This had to be the most tranquil, peaceful place on earth. Quite a contrast from the maddening rush I experienced during freefall.

My instructor pointed out the airport. I could see my brother and my boyfriend already on the ground. I watched as my sister-in-law as she just walked on to the ground to safety. She made it look too easy; I hoped I could be so graceful.

We approached the ground very quickly, but then with just a pull of the parachute straps we lingered in the air and just stepped down as if we were on a string of stairs. With only two steps we stopped. My entire body was shaking with excitement, and I couldn't believe I was actually standing on the ground, or even standing at all.

My boyfriend was straight ahead not to far from us. His face was beaming with a smile bigger than I had ever seen. I tried to run to him, but I soon realized I was still fastened to

my instructor. It only took a second and I was free and running across the field into his arms. We were both on fire with excitement, as we yelled: "We did it!"

There was something about conquering our fears that gave us this immense rush of adrenaline. We knew we were hooked and this was only the beginning.

The Usher Issue

Milly Laux

Shhhhhh. . .

Old men, servants for God's people,
Collect collateral at temple, church,
cathedral.
Keep children quiet, and old ladies
from a fall.

Guard us, guide us where to sit.
(Don't forget!) Pass that d*#@! basket.
On beck and call, behind a wall . . .
go count it all(!)

And like a corny Rockwell painting,
Ushers aid the one who's fainting,
With yellowed teeth and marbled blue eyes.

So right and righteous, proud and puffy,
In poly-plaid (someone's dad's?!) jacket;
aren't they stuffy?
Weird white shoes,
have you seen these guys?

But,
Over there
Our Hawaiian ushers were just a blast!
Rock 'n Rollers, Spot Checkers,
who eluded normal cast.
Retired divers, easygoing,
aged seventy or more!

Strong men, pony-tailed,
muscular and tanned.
more 'at home' under water, than on land.
Half-hearted "Collectors," everyone's poor.

Selling hard-earned shells, all types,
all kinds,
Tourist idea to help the neighbors,
with their finds.
When church is done, Old Scuba Divers
have their fun.

So as we see our ushers, we think
of new things now.
Of retirement, a new life, a new joy,
we will allow.
When church comes, Old Ushers
have their fun.

Children's candy

Milly Laux

tiny hands, red-stained
sticky stuff on chubby cheeks
gloppy. . .tacky. . .goo

The Angry Horn

Milly Laux

Come on in, Lena!
Sing for us, girl! Brighten our day!
Delicious . . . sound . . . uu-uuuuu.
u-u-uu-uuuuuuuuuuuu

Now, quietly . . . get out that back door.
Get out of our way —

Welcome! Lena, the Horn!
You're one of us.
. . . don't be angry, girl . . .
Turn us one, give us a whirl.
Beautiful Lady . . . Slender, Sultry Singer.
uu-u-u-uuuuuuuuuu
u-u-uuuuuuuuu

but-
Never forget our rules:
(Don't you ever!
NEVER use our bathrooms.
And . . . don't EVER touch any whiteman
especially not on t.v., the rules!)
Never!, girl, Never!

Hey! Talk to us, Horn!
Sexy, Silky, Smooth.
——OOOOhhhh!!!!!——
uuuuuUUUUUuuuuuu
UUUU-u-u-UUUUU
Unbelievable voice!
u-U-uu-uuuuuu

Go on home, now, girl.
Leave. Don't linger.
Leave. Lena.
and
Come on back . . . when we call, ya' hear?
Remember now!

No anger!

hands

Andy Neill

waved greetings everyone

up, off the ground, behold,
a pair for holdin'

fingertip pointed, anointed one

opposed, rolled up, fist
handled with care

gesture, opposition, disgust,
or peace.

pat on the back,
take up some slack.

opened, cupped, held out,
grasping for hope,
helping hands

traced affections,
hand over fist

folded interlaced for grace

steering futures, passing torches, turning pages

key stroke, digitized (2, 5, and 10 or 1 and 0)
fingered harmony

snap attention, clap approval, slap out of fear
hold on for your life

touched by one
manipulated a world
kneading to know more
pass the bread then,

wave goodbye

Bats at Volo Bog

for my student, Dan, who died in a car accident that night

Susan Sink

We went convinced that the bats would rise
to feed from the bog, ten-thousand thick,
a cloud of black, blood-sucking bats
from the seething September growth.

Even stuffed in the slide show
and told their slight weight:
one quarter ounce, on third, three or four
slipped into an envelope
    and sent on one stamp,

we still thought from
    that square barn window
some miraculous dark force would fly —
a mass of fully formed mammals
with wings outstretched,
    some slow-motion wonder.

Soaked in DEET, shrouded with netting,
we waited on lawn chairs
    in the deepening dusk,
passed specimens of the dead babies
in plastic bags, squinting in the dark.

Then the first fluttered, (What? Is that it?)
and children crowded close shouting:
    There's one!
Then in fives and tens, darting
    and disappearing,
like any of the earth's ephemera, they fed.

Others left. We stayed to see inside the barn,
where guano burned our eyes and throats
    and made
a scaly dryness to the lofty place.
    The bats in the rafters
were unlovely, simple as barnacles.

We made our way out, stopping to see
a dozen pressed behind a single shingle,
paneling bulged by nesting,
    and into the dark,
darker than before, in a simple way of night.

We drove down and away on two lanes,
the headlights making weight
    in the bog's fog,
and crickets hopping in and out of the light,
and stars steady beyond the window panes.

We reached the highway just
    when we thought we were lost,
and entered, spotting from the ramp
    the ribbons
of headlights and taillights
    before we merged,
increased our speed, became
    indistinguishable from the rest.

The Healing (a villanelle)

Susan Sink

I waited for a reason why,
sitting just out of hearing.
My mother who was dying did not die,

began her everlasting life
that day. She told a pastor and his wife
(while I waited for a reason why),

testimony, how God struck her down
to turn her to His healing,
my mother who was not just sick but dying.

I was at school when she dialed
the evangelist from our red kitchen phone,
my mother who needed no reasons why,

who prayed where no one prayed before,
cried,
and was healed. It disappeared,
what we were fearing.
My mother who was dying did not die,

became a prophet, spoke like God
we'd always known she was. I was twelve,
believed.
How else could I explain — I've tried —
my mother, who was dying, alive.

Vassily
(An excerpt from a memoir)
Evelyn Smith

It was on the Island of Honshu that Evelyn first met Vassily.

At 1 p.m. on the sunny Friday of October 28, 1994, Evelyn and Zachary taxied down the departure runway of the world's busiest airport. Their jumbo jet, laden with 150,000 pounds of fuel for the long flight ahead, struggled against the Earth's gravitational bond before becoming airborne.

Once aloft, Evelyn asked, "Are you certain that a nuclear physicist from Chicago is welcome in Japan?"

"Why else would Yucello continue to invite me? The work is valuable to all of us. The United States' bombing of Hiroshima is history. It happened on August 6, 1945, almost fifty years ago. You know about the economic prosperity of Japan since then. However, petroleum is a problem. Japan doesn't have a secure source, so the nuclear option is attractive. The country is not likely to retreat into darkness now. Also, concerning nuclear particles, do you realize that I've been working with radioactivity for thirty years, and there is more radiation up here, than I've ever been exposed to at work?"

"Yes, and I wish you had not reminded me. Since the layer of atmosphere is thin up here, there's not much to absorb the sun's radiation. The sun is a massive nuclear reactor, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's a hydrogen bomb that lasts billions of years. Also, there is cosmic radiation."

"So, we're getting zapped by high energy protons from outer space! Maybe we will mutate into ninjas. Meanwhile, back on Earth, what percent of Japan's electric power is nuclear?"

"Thirty. France and Belgium have 80 percent and the U.S., twenty."

"Well, I appreciate electricity. I'm glad I don't have to walk to a stream to do my washing."

"Or, use a rainbarrel, as you once did."

"What do you know about our apartment?"

"It has a washer and a dryer."

"Will we have chairs to sit on?"

"Probably. Singhi and Yucello have some Western-style furniture, but Singhi usually kneels on the floor. Don't worry. I think you're going to like Japan."

"I'm nervous. I've read that people will not make eye-to-eye contact with me in the shops, trains and streets."

"It's not that bad. The scientists I work with all speak English. Some young people in the stores will speak to you."

Besides being worried about living in Japan, Evelyn anticipated a cramped, spiritually-draining journey. Contrary to her expectations, the flight was smooth, the seats were roomy and the meals were timed well. From her window, she could see the warm sun set in a clear blue sky. She felt vital and reassured. The movie, Class Action, with Whoopie Goldberg and Ted Danson, brought a patriotic glow to her cheeks.

"Zachary, isn't it great to see black America rising! Whoopie Goldberg is so clever! and charming! and tough!"

Their thirteen-hour flight from Chicago, site of the world's first sustained nuclear reaction, brought them to Narita, Japan's International Airport, near Tokyo. They had flown to the northwest, over Alaska, taking the shortest distance between their home and their destination. This resulted in a very long day of "staying with the Sun." Although it was cloudy and rainy in Narita, it was still daylight when the Boeing 747 touched ground in the late afternoon of Saturday, October 29. Without a period of darkness, the plane had traveled, nonstop, one quarter of the way around the world, crossed the International Date Line, and entered a new calendar day. It's cruising speed had been six hundred mph, and its altitude, six miles above sea level. In Narita, Zachary had reservations at a Holiday Inn. From the terminal, the familiar marquee welcomed the American couple, and they slept well.

The following morning Evelyn and Zachary felt refreshed and enthusiastic about venturing into a new culture. The breakfast buffet offered abundant and exotic bitesized pieces of seafood, fresh fruits, and pastries. Evelyn limited her selections, chose a window seat and began experimenting with chopsticks. Purposely, she had avoided practicing with the oriental utensils before coming to Japan because she intended to lose weight by eating rice inefficiently, one grain at a time. She calculated that it would take her thirty minutes to eat half a cup of rice. In six weeks she would be as slender as Singhi. Alas, the sight of the buffet psychically triggered her Pavlovian gland. She postponed her dietary regimen. By the time Zachary arrived at the table-for-two, he had an American-size helping of everything, and, Evelyn, motivated by hunger, had become skilled at manipulating the utensils. With a serving of tender and sweet black seaweed, Hiziki, she succumbed to the magic of the Orient. One by one, the delicate morsels melted and dissolved in her mouth. She went back to the buffet for seconds, then thirds. Zachary's careful planning and thoughtful foresight allowed the twosome to linger over bottomless cups of mood-enhancing orange-pekoe tea. Large glass windows revealed that they were in an extensive and serene tsukiyama garden. Dark bluish-black, ocean-flattened stones simulated a flowing river and a peaceful sea. Striking black and white birds twittered amid the lacy scarlet foliage of Japan's tinyleaved, Autumn maples. Silent, invisible gardeners had clipped the needles of the vibrantly-green pines into poodle puffs. A clump of tall bamboo simulated a forest. Immaculately sculpted hills represented mountains. Both served to obscure the noisy, congested highways of this modern industrial giant.

Yucello and his wife, Singhi, met the American scientist and his wife at the Holiday Inn.

The two couples then traveled northward along the eastern coastal plain of the Island of Honshu. Singhi's Nissan quickly exited the busy suburban area and purred along on a quiet rural route.

Singhi: "Why your lab in Chicago is closed?"

Evelyn: "The security costs were too high. Many young Americans have focused their frustrations on nuclear as the source of all evil in the world. Some anti-nukes are dedicated to killing the nuclear monster."

Singhi: "Was the work about weapons?"

Zachary: "No, not at all. However, any organization that works with radioactive materials is a target for terrorism."

Yucello: "We don't have as much rebellion here. Too much freedom of speech can be destructive."

Evelyn: "We need balanced dialogue. Several years ago, Zachary recruited a physicist to defend the nuclear option in a debate at our local high school. The physicist spoke well, explaining that no one, in this country, had died in a nuclear accident in the forty-five years that we had been using nuclear power. By contrast, coal mining accidents had taken many lives. Moreover, many people had suffered and died of diseases caused by inhaling coal by-products. Of course, the most used fuel is petroleum. But, since the debate, we have fought a war over Middle East petroleum. Luckily, it was a limited war, and we did not suffer many fatalities. However, many veterans of that war are victims of 'unknown diseases.' So, although petroleum and coal are alternatives to nuclear power, they have highly visible dangers that are commonly disregarded. At the local high school, the pronuclear side won the debate, but logic and truth rarely can subdue strong, irrational emotions. The speaker for the anti-nukes was the author of a bestselling book on the topic, but he really could not counter the arguments of a nuclear physicist. In fact, he tried to withdraw from the debate when he discovered who his opponent would be. Another point is that most nuclear physicists have studied intensively for nine University years and are neither popular writers nor rousing rhetoricians. So meaningful dialogue is difficult. By the way, we've heard that next year, at the Bologna Conference, high school science students are going to interview the nuclear physicists. It means that you and Zach may appear on Italian TV. Also, did you know that Italy doesn't produce any nuclear power?"

Yucello: "No, but they do use it. They buy it from France."

Thus, a two-hour ride in Singhi's shiny silver Nissan Sunny, brought the foursome to the seaside village of Tokai. Singhi showed Evelyn and Zachary their living quarters. Their home for six weeks was in a duplex. It was an enlarged version of a typically-small Japanese home. There were four modest rooms upstairs: two bedrooms, an office and a baby room. Because they had Western-style beds, the large shelved closets, which the Japanese use for daytime storage of futons, were superfluous. At ground level, the front door opened into a large bi-level entrance hall. Here the Americans learned to remove their outdoor shoes, and step up and into pink or blue silk brocade clompers. Japanese people consider it uncivilized to place the bottom of a street shoe on an indoor floor. Evelyn and Zachary appreciated the logic, so they learned to remove their shoes on entering the house. Off the entrance hall was a tiny toilet room. There they stepped into toilet slippers as they realized the barbarity of using toilet-room footwear in other parts of the house. The toilet had an electrically-heated seat

but otherwise the room was cold. Venting was by jalousie window to the brisk north side of the building. When the toilet was flushed, water for washing hands flowed into a tiny sink that sat above the tank, and was part of the toilet. Also exiting from the entrance hall was a room with sink and storage for toiletries. This room contained a modern washer and dryer. Instructions were in Japanese but trial and error brought success. Next to this room was the large sauna, shower and bathtub area. Here the couple transgressed local custom by using soap in a tub intended only for relaxing an already-scrubbed and thoroughly-rinsed body. The kitchen was also on the main floor. It flowed into the dining room, which, in turn, flowed into the living room. The living room was furnished with a sofa, arm chairs, coffee table, and a TV embodying the latest in electronic technology. The duplex had a satellite dish and easily picked up ten channels including one that occasionally delivered English language clips from CNN.

While the American physicist and his wife were crossing the International Date Line, Vassily was, for his first time, traversing the now fallen Iron Curtain. He, Yucello, and Zachary had come together to work on a nuclear fusion project at Japan's Atomic Energy Research Institute (JAERI). There were the usual startup problems: generating a strong, stable, monoenergetic beam of neutrons; arranging and rearranging stacks of polyethylene bricks to absorb scattered neutrons; and, finally, collecting the neutron irradiated samples quickly enough to allow a measurement of the induced radioactivity before much decay had occurred. Accelerator time had been scheduled a year in advance. The scientists had six weeks to get results. This international trio was using the world's most intense neutron generator to study samples prepared by a gaseous diffusion process at the Klopin Institute of St. Petersburg. The cooperative effort between a Japanese, a Russian, and an American allowed the combination of: JAERI's 14MeV accelerator, the Klopin Institute's rare, highly-refined samples, including a unique nickel sample enriched with the rare Nickel-64 isotope, and Zachary's ingenious use of a vacuum pump to speed up collection of the irradiated samples. In all previous experiments, the experimentalists had to turn the generator off while one of them physically entered the test area to retrieve the sample. A counter then measured the radiation sample. These measurements became the raw data for mathematical analysis.

Ten years ago Japanese physicists were using the Chicago facility; now the situation was reversed. Having limped along with high security costs for ten years, the Fast Neutron Generator (FNG) in Chicago had finally succumbed to budget restraints. The scientists dismantled the accelerator and sent it to the Voortrekker Institute in South Africa. Golden handshakes salved bruised egos as these well-published alumni of our nation's finest graduate schools were packed off to early retirement near a nuclear waste dump in Utah.

The event that terminated the FNG was the U.S. bombing of a terrorist camp in Libya in 1984. Shortly after that, wiretaps revealed that revengeful Libyan agents had contacted gangs in Chicago. Thus, some of Chicago's own people, were betraying us with treasonous acts of terrorism. The FNG was high on the list of targets. Punctuating the danger, was the fact that anti-nukes had bombed a nuclear accelerator at the University of Wisconsin a decade earlier. At FNG, once an open-door facility, the cost of 24-hour guards, two twelve-foot-high

barbed-wire fences, and a reinforced concrete guard tower absorbed the major financial resources of the group. Not enough money was left for equipment and salaries. Zachary was the youngest member and lonely survivor of the FNG team. From 1985 on, he occupied a small office with a computer, submitted yearly proposals, and received mandates directly from Washington. Working with physicists in Belgium, Germany, Japan, Russia, Argentina and Nigeria by E-mail and extensive travel, Zachary has helped keep United States' nuclear effort alive. The international exchange of ideas and the variety of equipment available is producing exciting results.

Since the collapse of communism in Russia, life had been difficult for Vassily too. The search for food was competitive and time consuming. Remuneration for hours at the St. Petersburg lab was puny and sporadic. Fortunately, Yucello's reputation in Japan had won financial support for the experiment. Vassily, and his samples were to reside in Japan for six weeks. He was earning five times his promised, though not forthcoming, home salary.

Working together, these nuclear physicists were striving to penetrate shadows of ignorance: to arrive at new and better understandings of particular nuclear structures and reactions. Zachary would analyze the experimental data and present a paper on the result six months later at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) conference in Bologna. Since the publication of his statistics books, he was considered a world expert at nuclear data analysis. His diligently assembled software would crunch the raw data into meaningful shape. The threesome was optimistic. Recent work done at the Belgian facility would, in all likelihood, be surpassed. Time constraints and technical challenges were tackled with long, tense days at the lab. The goal was to get the experiment working and collect as much data as possible. Other scientists eventually used some of the data from this experiment to build a device for detecting hidden nuclear weapons — such as plutonium and uranium bombs.

Each night Zachary telephoned Evelyn as he was leaving the lab. Often she put a precooked dinner in a slow oven to rewarm and strolled into the cool night air to meet him halfway. At other times, she was already in bed and told the weary, hungry scientist what was available in the refrigerator. He could also stop at the Seven-Eleven where the price of sashimi and sushi take-home platters dropped to half price after 8 p.m.

During their first weekend, Evelyn led Zachary on a daylight tour of the village of Tokai. It was fortunate that they did not have a car. They benefitted from walking — a rare activity for Americans. The first highlight of their excursion was a cemetery.

As they entered, Evelyn whispered, "Follow me." She led the way, tiptoeing across the crunchy gravel, to the northeast corner of the small plot and arrived in front of the Buddha.

"What an adorable little fellow he is!" Zachary exclaimed.

"Shush, Zachary, I don't want to attract attention. Don't look now, but I see someone watching from the window of the house directly behind you. Local residents surely don't want us poking around their sacred ancestral memorials, and they don't know that we're just looking," she whispered.

"This Buddha is only 16 inches tall, and what a blissful expression he has!" Zachary uttered in a low voice.

"Yes, the sun is highlighting his serene countenance. I'm really glad I've timed the light-

ing just right," Ev whispered as she whisked out her camera, pointed, clicked and quickly returned the camera to her bag.

Zachary wandered around just as intrigued as his wife.

Evelyn pointed to the many small pagoda-shaped lanterns, "These pagodas evolved from the Indian stupas — buildings where sacred relics, such as the bones of The Buddha, were kept."

"I wonder if the lanterns are ever lit at night? Let's meet here in the dark! Seeing glowing flames and curls of smoke in here at night would be a stirring experience," Zachary replied.

"Sure! We'll meet at midnight and I'll bring sake so we can bless each other and pour libations to The Buddha. By the way, did you know that Buddhism originated in India?"

"Yes," Zachary replied, "I remember the movie The Littlest Buddha, and now I've met him! I also know that, in Japan, Buddhism concerns itself with death and the afterlife. That means that burial and memorial services are Buddhist ceremonies. These bundles of tall sticks must relate to the afterlife. Look at these burnt ends. The ashes are crumbling in my fingers."

"Yes, I think there has been a Buddhist ceremony recently," Evelyn agreed. She imagined prayers, strange symbolic gestures, and oriental muttering as a trail of fragrant fumes issued skyward — connecting the living and the dead, the present and the past.

As they strolled out of the cemetery, Evelyn shared her understandings accumulated from perusing guide books, observations made during her daily outings, discussions with Japanese friends, and imagination in those instances where her curiosity was aroused and information was not immediately available: "There are two major religions in Japan: Shintoism and Buddhism. Shintoism is the indigenous religion and concerns itself with everyday life. It is a form of nature worship. In recent years our Japanese friends are embarrassed about this religion because it once included Emperor worship. They believed that the Emperor was a direct descendent of the Gods."

"Yes, I know, the terms of surrender imposed on Japan, by the U.S., at the end of World War II, dictated that Emperor Hirohito deny his divinity. It was reported that Hirohito was relieved to admit to the Japanese people, in January 1946, that he was not a God," Zachary added.

"But, I find the religion appealing because not only was the Emperor said to be divine, but all people, all plants, and all things are considered sacred," I offered.

"The idea of every person being sacred really doesn't jive with James Clavell's Shogun does it?"

"No, but that was brutal fiction and, if you think Hiroshima is history, then you must admit that Clavell was creating ancient history."

"Okay, but let's not be too naive about the sanctity of human life in the Orient. Religion doesn't seem to play a big part in Japanese life today. Do you remember passing the Shinto Shrine on our way to Tokai?" asked Zachary; "A priest was blessing a car."

"Yes, I noticed his cleric dress. I think he was sprinkling sake on the car. I'm glad Yucello was there to explain that it was a Shinto priest blessing a new purchase," I replied.

"Also, related to nature worship: if we visit Japan's famous gardens, we are going to see branches of sacred and ancient pines lovingly wrapped in tatami and supported on crutches. Then too, there will be gardens where gravel and rocks are aesthetically arranged — or, you

might say aesthetically arranged, since it's dry landscaping. People will be meditating, with cups of green tea. Zen Buddhists make the kare-sansui gardens, but there is a strong Shinto influence. I want to sip green tea and meditate on the carefully arranged, sacred rocks. Instead of gazing at clouds in the sky, we can stare at swirls of raked gravel and see reflections of our own psyches," Evelyn said.

Their next stop was the Cultural Center.

"Zachary," Evelyn said, pointing down, "look at the art on these terra-cotta tiles. Do you see the influence of calligraphy? of nature worship?"

"I bet I can draw a pine branch just like that one," he said pointing. "Remember? I'm genetically talented. My grandfather was an artist."

Students had engraved their art on the tiles that were then used to pave a courtyard. Futuristic skyscrapers and spacecraft mingles with more traditional rendering of nature and calligraphy. Evelyn pulled a camera and sketch pad from her shoulder bag. Zachary sketched while Evelyn focused on preserving tiles that they might imitate back home in Chicago. She was generating ideas for decorating a one square-yard area: their window well — pines painted on the corrugated metal siding? a clump of dried bamboo stalks painted green? raked gravel with rocks or pottery? perhaps moss and a bonsai, or maybe her collection of smooth rocks from Lake Michigan. She looked at Zachary's sketch and her dreams dwindled.

"Zachary, are you sure your grandfather was an artist?" she asked. "That doesn't look like a tree. It looks more like a path than a plant!"

Zachary replied, "Perhaps we can paint the corrugated metal yellow, and make a blue moon."

Evelyn noted, "Yes, we could use a dish to outline the full moon and add some glow-in-the-dark stars from the Adler Planetarium — it will be our original if your ability to copy doesn't turn into something more beautiful."

They left the cultural center and strolled around a residential area. The homes were all protected by high hedges or walls. But, for once in her life Evelyn was tall. In Japan she was tall because Japanese people are, on the average, shorter than Americans. Standing on her toes she could peek over barricades and see into tiny private gardens. Daringly, she had parted the branches of a hedge and was pointing at the topiary in her favorite garden. Suddenly, a dark figure on a bike screeched to a halt beside them. Evelyn looked down at a large leather shoe. It was army issue and scuffed from use. It's steel-reinforced heel was chipping into the concrete sidewalk and a blunt toe crushed the weedy growth at the edge of the footpath.

Zachary introduced Evelyn to his Russian colleague.

"Hello, Evil-lynn," said Vassily.

She felt her face grow hot as she released her grip on the bush. Breathing slowly, she stared at the thick, kinky, wild white hair. The two small, pinched gray eyes seemed misplaced in his swarthy face. He was not at all what she expected a Russian scientist to look like. No, he looked more like an American blend.

Remembering a café three blocks away, she invited Vassily, "Would you like to join us for coffee?"

A quick "Nyet," and he abruptly pushed off, receding into the distance at a rapid pace. Vassily's precipitous retreat stunned Evelyn, and she turned to Zachary with questioning eyes. The answer was a shrug. The man from St. Petersburg remained a mystery.

Auntie Caroline

Sharon Thomas

I spotted her walking toward me, not because I recognize her, but because she was the only passenger frantically waving at me. I couldn't believe this long-legged, beautiful, young woman was actually "Little Gracie." My husband Lou and I had gone to O'Hare to meet Grace's flight from New Hampshire. She was spending a week with us during her summer break from Dartmouth College.

"Auntie Caroline!" She ran toward me and wrapped me in her long arms.

"Hi, Gracie! Oh, it's so good to see you, baby."

"Oh, Auntie, don't cry." She gave Lou a bear hug.

"Come on, girls. Let's go get your bags." Lou said.

"Did you check a bag, Gracie?" I asked.

"Two."

I struggled to match their long strides and was out of breath by the time we got to the baggage claim area. She had indeed packed two large suitcases.

"How long are you staying girl?" Lou said as he heaved her suitcases into the trunk of our car. Grace gave a little giggle. Those two had always gotten along so well together. Grace's father had been out of her life since she was five years old. Grace's mother, Maryann, had told me that Grace had always preferred men to women. Maryann thought Grace had always been looking for a father figure.

"Did you want to do anything special this week, Gracie?" I asked.

"No. I just want to hang out."

"How's school going?" I asked.

"Oh, fine."

"Do you like Dartmouth?"

She just shrugged her shoulders and looked out the window. We were almost home. "This area sure has built up since the last time I was here," she said.

"When was that?" Lou asked.

"About three years ago," I said, "All these homes are new." We lived in Southeast Naperville, and there is new construction everywhere.

"Well here we are," Lou said as he pulled in the driveway.

I settled Grace into the guestroom upstairs that she always stayed in on her visits.

"Should we call your Mom?"

"Could you, Auntie Caroline? I'm so tired. I think I'll just take a little nap." She had already crawled into bed before I could disagree.

So I closed the door and went to call Maryann. Maryann had been one of my best friends since high school. We had also gone to college together. She had married right out of college and had Grace a year later. It really seemed like just yesterday; I could still remember Grace as a little squalling infant so clearly. It was Sunday, so I dialed Maryann at home.

"Hello," she answered.

"Hi, Maryann. It's Caroline. Just wanted to let you know Gracie made it safely."

"Oh, good. She didn't want to talk to me?"

"She lay down for a nap. She seemed really tired."

"Yeah, sure. Thanks for taking her, Caro."

"I love having her, you know that."

"This is no longer the sweet little Gracie you remember. This is the new, meaner version. Send her back if she gives you any trouble."

"She won't. She's been very sweet, really."

"If you say so."

They had been butting heads for the last few years. Typical teenage stuff. No different than any other mother and daughter as far as I could see. My mother and I barely spoke to each other the whole time I was in high school. Maybe not having children of my own made it easier for me to look at their situation objectively. I didn't have the memories of the sweet little girl curled up in my lap whispering, "I love you, Mommy."

"I'll have her call you later on, okay?" I said.

"Sure. Talk to you later."

I went downstairs and joined Lou in the kitchen. He was making dinner. I helped him chop up some vegetables.

"Is the kid asleep?" he asked.

"Yeah. I don't know how you can call her a kid. She's huge."

"Did you call Maryann?"

"Yeah, I just hung up with her. I guess Maryann and Gracie have been having problems."

"Anything serious?"

"I don't think so. Just communication problems as far as I can tell."

"Well they'll be okay."

"Yeah. I know." We continued to make dinner in silence.

We were watching TV in the family room when Grace came downstairs from her nap. She rubbed her eyes and yawned.

"Something smells great. What is it?"

"Lasagna. It's ready if you're hungry."

"Yeah, I'm starving."

We piled our plates with food and came back to the family room to eat in front of the TV. Grace had always liked to eat in our living room since she was a little girl. At home they always ate at the table together; TV off. We spent the evening in front of the TV watching Gracie shows. She was still up watching TV when Lou and I went to bed.

During the next couple of days, I spent very few actual waking hours with Grace. She kept very different hours. She would go to sleep near 4:00 a.m. and wake up around 2:00-3:00 p.m. Sometimes in the afternoon we would go shopping or to the video store to rent some movies for her. When Lou came home from work around 6:00 p.m., we would all make dinner together. Then we'd watch TV until Lou and I went off to bed around 11:00 p.m.

It wasn't until Thursday with only two days to go in her visit that I actually was able to sit down with Grace and have a conversation. She came downstairs as usual around 2:30 p.m. I was in the kitchen making a pot of tea. She sat down on a stool behind the breakfast bar and watched me.

"Auntie when did you start drinking?'

I was completely caught off gaud. My first thought was to deny it, but I was sure she'd seen some of the many pictures of me and her mother drinking at some party or other. I didn't want to tell her the truth either, that I was fourteen and not even in high school yet.

"Well, Gracie I was pretty young I guess." I turned and looked at her.

"Did you drink when you were my age?" she asked.

Like a fish. I kept wondering, what would Maryann want me to say. I decided to just stick with the truth. "Yes."

"Did mom?"

"Yes. Why, Hon?"

"I was just curious." She shrugged her shoulders and lay her chin against her folded arms on the counter. "Did you drink a lot back then?"

Everyday, but I didn't want her to know that. "More than I should have, Gracie. Do you drink?" I really didn't want to know that. I wanted her to remain pure little Gracie for me.

"Yeah, I drink. Don't tell mom, ok? She'd just yell."

I wanted to let her know that I probably agreed with her mom about her drinking. But I didn't know how to tell her without being a hypocrite. So again I just went with the truth. "You know, Gracie, I quit drinking when I was twenty-two. Right about the time when I legally should have been starting to drink, I was ready to quit.

"You mean you haven't drunk since you were twenty-two?" She looked at me with disbelief.

"No, I have occasionally, but that was the last time I drank as a life-style."

"Why did you quit?"

"Well, Gracie, there were several reasons, but basically I just got tired of the day after."

"You mean being hung over?"

"No, although that was no fun either. No . . . let me tell you about my most famous day after, ok?"

"Ok."

"I was twenty-one and moving to Texas to be closer to this guy I was absolutely sure I was in love with. It was my last week in Pontiac, and my friend Susan and

I went out every night that week to the local bar where everyone went."

"Aunt Susan?"

"Yeah, Aunt Susan, but don't tell her that I'm telling you this story, ok?"

"Sure."

"Well, one night Susan and I walked into a bar and sitting at the bar, all alone, was Dave Coleman. Dave had been a senior in high school went I was a freshman, and I had been in love with him from afar since I was fourteen. He'd gone to college at Eastern. One day my college roommate and I went to Charleston which was only 45 minutes from Champaign, where we went to school. We went to this club, and there he was, checking my ID. We'd go to this club all the time after that just to watch him, but he never said anything to me."

"No way, too afraid of rejection. But that night, Susan got tired of me drooling over him and grabbed my arm, and we sat down on two stools next to him. She talked to him for a couple of minutes, and then said 'Caro, you stay her I'll be right back.' She went off to talk to some people. So there I was with Dave. I bought him beers. I talked to him about some rumors I had heard about him. I remember putting my hands on his thighs as we talked. At some point, Susan came over and took our picture together. He was buying me watermelon shots. Things were going great. Then I fell off my bar stool."

"What?" Grace was laughing.

"Yeah. Susan came over and got me. She led me out of the bar. I remember her driving me home and feeling very sick. She helped me to my bedroom. I was so out of it that I couldn't find anything to wear to bed. So finally found this half-slip. I pulled the elastic up over my breasts. The slip just barely covered my butt. Susan tucked me in, put a garbage can by the bed and left."

"So what happened the day after?" she asked.

"Well, when I got up the next morning I was in my parents' bed wearing nothing but my little half-slip."

"What! Why?"

"I don't know. Sometime during the night I crawled into bed between my parents."

"No! Mom would have killed me! What did your mom and dad do?"

"That morning my mom said 'You must have been pretty drunk last night. Daddy had to leave.' I didn't ask her why my dad had to leave. I didn't want to know. I just wanted to crawl into a hole and die. I felt like crap, and I was totally humiliated. But it only got worse. Susan called me later and told me all about my behavior the night before. How I was falling all over Dave, how I fell off my barstool, how I ran smack into some people on my way out of the bar. I could barely look at him. We went downstairs and played pool with some friends. Later on we went back upstairs to get some more drinks. I was standing there sipping my Diet Coke when I hear 'Caro, do you want a beer?' I turned and looked. It was Dave, laughing. 'Aren't you drinking tonight?" I told him no and gave him a dirty look. He just laughed. 'Are you sure you don't want a drink, maybe a watermelon shot?' I told him no that I thought I drank enough the night before to last me awhile. Then he said, 'I know, Susan told me.' I asked him when and he told me 'Last night after she took you home she came back to the bar. You'd left your wallet and camera on the bar. She asked where your stuff was and I gave them to her and asked her how you were doing, and she said you were sick and I wasn't supposed to know.' Thanks a lot Susan. I must have rolled my eyes or something because he said, "Like I didn't know that when you fell off the bar stool or ran into those people." I couldn't take it anymore, so I just walked away from him and he was still laughing."

"He was just teasing you, Auntie Caroline."

"I know, mercilessly. But I was just so humiliated. I couldn't face him. I could barely even talk to my dad, but he never said a word about it."

"So you quit drinking after that night?"

"No, I didn't. I didn't quit until the following summer. I went to Texas and partied every single night. My first semester in school at Texas Tech I got no grades because I had not attended class enough. The

second semester I didn't even enroll in school. So after a year of my partying at my parents' expense, they told me I had to come back to Illinois and quit screwing around and finish school."

"So really you quit because your parents told you to."

"No, I quit because I had to. I wasn't accomplishing anything. I was just sick of that feeling the next day. I mean I had a great time when I was drunk. But the next day when I'd talk with my friends about the things I'd done while I was drunk, I'd just feel sick inside. I did too many things I felt ashamed about afterwards. That Dave Coleman night was pretty mild actually."

"You can't really drink every night where I go to school un less you're twenty-one. I mostly just drink on weekends when there's a party." I knew Maryann had sent Grace to that little town in the middle of nowhere in New Hampshire for a reason. "It's hard to believe you and mom are the same age, she seems so much older. Like she can't remember the last time she made an ass of herself."

"She remembers, Gracie. She is just so used to being your parent. It's like she doesn't want to tell you the mistakes she's made, so you don't have an excuse or reason to make the same mistakes yourself. I can tell you these stories because I don't have to be strong for you or be responsible for your actions, you know?"

"I guess so. But I still wish she wouldn't treat me like a kid. Like I can't handle the truth."

"You know I still feel that way about my mom sometimes. Although it's gotten better over the years, it's still hard for her to treat me as an equal, and I'll probably never be her confidante. And that's ok too. We still have a pretty good relationship."

Grace just nodded.

"What do you want from you mom, Gracie?"

"I just want her to back off. She's always in my face, in my business."

"Do you tell her that?"

"Oh, yeah. She wants me to come home for the summer. I wanted to stay at school and go to summer school. She said no, but she let me come here."

"She probably just misses you, Gracie."

"Yeah, but even if I came home for the summer I wouldn't be spending that much time with her. She works all day, and I go out with my friends at night. I'm an adult now, but she still controls me."

"She will have a say over what you do while you're still financially dependent on her, at least as far as how her money is spent. Don't you think that's fair?"

"I don't know." She got up and went to the refrigerator. "Can I make myself a sandwich?"

"Sure, help yourself." She was finished talking.

When Lou came home that night, he took us out for fondue. We had a lot of fun. Grace reminds me so much of her mother in looks; some of her expressions and mannerisms are identical to Maryann's. I could remember Maryann and I would go out to eat dinner when we were Grace's age and linger over coffee for hours, talking and laughing. Being with Grace was like reliving those good times.

The next afternoon when Grace woke up I asked her to call her mother. She'd been putting if off for days. She went upstairs and used the phone in her room. She came back downstairs about an hour later. Her eyes were all red, and I knew she had been crying.

"Is your mom going to pick you up at the airport tomorrow?"

"Yeah."

"Everything ok, Gracie?"

She nodded and wiped her nose with her hand. I handed her a kleenex. "Mom says I have to come home for the summer because she doesn't have enough money to send me to summer school."

"You didn't know that?"

"No. I didn't even think about the money."

"So you're staying with your mom this summer?"

She nodded.

"You ok with that?"

"Yeah. She said she'd try to be less controlling, if I would try to be less hostile. So we'll see . . ."

"I'm glad you worked it out. Do you want to do anything special tonight?"

"Yeah. Can we go to the city?"

That night we took a dinner cruise on Lake Michigan. After dinner, we explored Navy Pier and walked along the Lake. It was late when we got home, so we went straight to sleep. The next morning we made pancakes for breakfast, then took Grace to the airport. She gave us both a big bear hug. I cried as I watched her walk down the jetway. Lou gave me a big hug and with his arm around me we left.

That night as we lay in bed, Lou turned to me and said, "You ok, Caro?"

I just turned into his arms and cried. It was moments like this that I had been so afraid when I was younger; the feeling of regret for not deciding to have children.

"You know you're always like this after a visit from one of your friends' kids. But it'll go away."

"But, she's such a great girl. Don't you feel any regret?"

"You know, Caro, I just don't think that way. This is just the way my life is. I can't sit around and think about what could have been if this or if that . . . you know?"

I didn't know. We are so different in that regard. It's like he is in denial of any negative emotion, and I wallow in it.

"Tell me the truth. Aren't you a little tired after her visit?" he asked.

"Actually, yes, I am. I'm exhausted. Not physically like I was when I had to run around after her when she was younger. But emotionally I'm wiped from worrying about her. You know . . . is she hungry? Is she sleeping enough? Is she sleeping too much? Is she bored? And it's not just her physical needs worry about. I worry about how she was getting along with her mom. I worry about whether I said the wrong things to her. Every little detail I seemed to sweat. It's like every little thing I do or say to her is so important. If I do the wrong thing, I might set her off or damage her tender psyche."

"And you regret not being a parent?"

"Yeah, somewhat. She's so warm. Maryann must feel so proud when she looks at Gracie. They're so much alike. It's like part of her will always live on in Gracie."

That's why a lot of people have kids, to get that feeling of immortality. Like your life will continue because your children will still be there after you die. But I don't know if that's a good reason to have kids."

"What's a good reason?"

"Caro, God we have this conversation every time these kids come over. I really thought we decided this years ago."

"We did. I just can't help but wonder if it was the right decision."

"Well, don't do this to yourself, please! I'm very happy with our life together. I hope you are too."

I smiled at him and gave him a kiss. A few minutes later, I could tell by his steady breathing that he had fallen asleep.

I thought about what he said. I did need to make peace with our decision. Our life together is very good. We're financially well off. We've been able to travel and see the world. Our relationship is strong. I am happy with my life. But still, sleep was a long time coming.

Wordeater 101 Student Jury:
Jeff Adams
Nicolle Byrnside
Jeff Hicks
Nancy Lockhart
Francine Tolf

Awards
Prose ($5.00)
Miguel Barron
Bonnie Kodrick
Evelyn Smith

Poetry ($5.00)
Erica Coffey
Erica Gallagher
Milly Laux

Cover Design ($20.00)
Michael Fletcher

John Stobart is solely responsible for the awards.

Submission Deadlines
Manuscript and cover designs
must be submitted to:
John Stobart, Room C-1069

by

May 6, 1998 - Wordeater 102

Cover Designs submitted must be one inch margins all around.
Emphasize lines. Use india ink.

This issue contains selections from students, faculty, alumni and friends of Joliet Junior College. Only current students are eligible for awards. Awards are not made to "anonymous" or pen name writers. Sign each page submitted and include your student identification number.

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